

MORAL CONDUCT – (SILA)

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ila or moral conduct is the principle of human behaviour that promotes orderly and peaceful existence in a community. Rules of moral conduct are to be found in every religion. They may resemble other codes of conduct to a greater or lesser degree depending on the Teacher or religious system from which they originated. Usually they comprise lists of actions from which to abstain, implying that any actions not covered by the prohibitions are permissible. A good example is afforded by the five *Silas* (of Buddhism), namely to abstain from taking the life of sentient beings, to abstain from taking possession of anything that has not been given by its owner, to abstain from sexual misconduct, to abstain from lying or evil speech, and to abstain from intoxicating drinks which are a primary cause of negligence. These five *Silas* are the

basic principles of Buddhism best known to most people. It is customary for them to be explained during almost every religious ceremony and those present at the ceremonies generally make a formal declaration of their intention to comply with them. People in Buddhist countries must have seen or heard monks enunciating the *Silas* ever since the time when they were still small children and did not understand them. Consequently it is of interest to consider the extent to which most people realize the importance of the *Silas* and what they think of them, especially as most of the *Silas* prescribe a code of conduct that is widely different from the general practice of human beings. Some people favour the *Silas* while others do not, as can be gathered from the following instances.

The first Sila: The prohibition against the taking of any life applies not only to humanity but also to creatures of every kind, both big and small; black ants as well as red ants. Each day a vast number of animals are slaughtered as food, for most people eat meat, while vegetarians are not common. In the field of science, animals are used in many researches and experiments. In the administrative field, arms are used in crime suppression. Law enforcement agencies punish law breakers. Belligerents at war use arms to destroy one another. The actions cited here as examples are not regarded as illegal or as running counter to normal worldly practice. Indeed, it may even be considered wrong to abstain from them, as is the case when constables or

soldiers fail in their police or military duties. Nowadays many kinds of animals are known to be carriers of microbes and, thanks to the microscope, germs and many sorts of microbes have been detected. Almost everything contains them – even drinking water. Only the larger impurities are caught by the filter; microbes can pass through. So infinite microbes pass into our throats with each draught of water. It is the same with medicines. Whenever they are used, either externally or internally, they destroy myriads of microbes. Are these microbes to be considered as living beings in (the sense of) the first *Sila* or are they not? If so, perhaps no one can fully comply with it. Besides, some are of the opinion that people who refrain from taking the life of animals should also refrain from eating meat, because it amounts to encouraging slaughter and is no less sinful according to them.

The second Sila: Taking possession of anything that has not been given by its owner or stealing, is also wrong, even legally speaking. However, there is, for instance, the exception of enemy property in the case of war.

The third Sila: Adultery is wrong. One who commits it does not command respect nor does one inspire confidence. Sexual misconduct involving persons with whom conjugal relations should be avoided according to custom, or those who are prohibited by law, or by the Dhamma, is also wrong. So is coercing by physical or even financial means a married or even unmarried person into consenting to such conduct. The purpose of this third *Sila* is to preserve the respectability of the family

of each person concerned and to safeguard its sanctity and inviolability. By the same token, respect of person, place and property should be customary behaviour, as laid down in the book “Ethics of Good People”, which says, for example: “Do not intrude into people’s homes without invitation. Do not peep into their rooms from outside”. It is proper for us to adopt manners derived from the Silas or moral rules, all of which aim at promoting good behaviour and discouraging laxity.

The fourth Sila: Lying is generally regarded as wrong. Nevertheless, people very seldom speak quite truthfully to one another and so their word can hardly be relied upon. Sometimes they are unable to speak the truth; for instance, they may have to lie to save themselves from harm, and doctors lie to bolster their patients’ morale. Lying under these circumstances may be contrary to the *Sila*, but it is not entirely contrary to its purpose. This *Sila* aims at bringing about mutual benefits by adhering to truth and avoiding verbal offences. Similarly, utterances harmful to another’s well-being, for example, malicious, abusive or slanderous speech intended either to deride others or to vaunt oneself may be truthful, yet they must be regarded as wrong, because they are contrary to the *Sila*. It is said that the Lord Buddha Himself said only what was truthful, useful and befitting. He laid down the *Sila* against lying and discouraged malicious, indecent and vain speech.

The fifth Sila: In spite of the rule prescribing abstention from intoxicating drinks, their consumption

does not decrease and authorized distilleries are working at full blast. Liquor shops are well patronized day and night. At receptions, fairs, etc., there are alcoholic drinks, to liven up the party otherwise they would be dull and drinkers would avoid them. Alcoholic drinks have thus become an income-earner which brings in a sizeable revenue each year.

Practices regarded as right and others regarded as wrong may both be contradictory to the *Silas*, as shown by the foregoing instances. All of these indicate that, one increasingly fails to understand the *Silas*, to recognize their importance and to appreciate their meaning for one's existence in this world. That is why each of the following (mixed right and wrong) views has its advocates:

1. *The principles of Silas should be altered to suit those who have worldly occupations.* For instance, some feel that the first *Sila* should be changed to allow killing to the extent permissible by law, i.e. only killing which is not authorized by law should be prohibited. Moreover the fourth *Sila* should, they feel, be made flexible and lying be allowed when it is done to protect oneself or others. So also with the fifth *Sila* when intoxicants are taken only occasionally and not to excess.

2. *The principles of the Silas should be left untouched but no one need pay attention to them.* If those who act thus abide by the law, they should be regarded as satisfactory people. After all the law is a sort of *Sila*. It is laid down to ensure the peace and welfare of the public, although it is not entirely based upon the

psychological principles and rational morality which are the foundation of the *Silas*, a point with which we shall deal later on.

3. *The principles of the Silas should be left unaltered, but heeded and observed only from time to time, according to particular circumstances.* Most Buddhists belong to the category of people who act in this way. They do not change the principles of the *Silas*, for they are truly interested in them and comply with them occasionally. For instance, some Buddhists do not take alcoholic drinks during a certain period, but subsequently they start drinking again. If they are fishermen or fishmongers, they disregard the *first Sila* which, if observed, would make fish catching or fish selling impossible, but they may refrain from killing other animals. If they are medical students, they do not entirely follow the *first Sila*, observance of which would render the use of animals for research and experimentation impossible, but they may observe the *Sila* whenever it is practical for them to do so, i.e. when it does not hinder them in their profession or in performing their duties.

4. *The principles of Sila should remain unaltered and be strictly complied with.* Very few hold this view. Even these may have some doubt in regard to microbes, and those who do not adhere strictly to the *Sila* may raise the same doubt either from curiosity or to contend that the *Sila* is impracticable. To decide whether microbes are living beings or not (in the sense of the *Sila*), one should consider the life of the Lord Buddha.

Whenever the Lord Buddha fell ill, he allowed Doctor Jivaka Komarabhacca to apply external remedies or give him medicine to be taken internally. Monks were also allowed to take or apply remedies to cure their diseases. Hence, we can conclude that the first *Sila* does not apply to microbes. If it did, then we could not eat nor drink anything, nor even breathe. *Silas* should be rules of conduct that can be followed by everyone in an ordinary, practical manner without having recourse to the aid of such instruments as the microscope. The use of those instruments should be reserved for people engaged in the medical or scientific professions.

With regard to the consumption of meat as food, Buddhists themselves are divided into two factions. One faction regards eating meat as being no less wicked than the act of slaughter. It holds that, if meat was not used as food, there would be no cause for the destruction of animals, hence consumption of meat is directly responsible for their slaughter and is therefore wrong. The *Vinaya* or disciplinary rule allows monks to eat meat under three conditions, namely: if they have not seen or heard the animals being slaughtered and have no reason to suspect that the slaughter was for their benefit as opposed to slaughter for sale in general. (There are also rules prohibiting monks from eating raw meat or the ten forbidden kinds of meat, which includes tiger meat and elephant flesh). Buddhists of this category, particularly Theravadin monks, should not be selective and are free to eat without fuss. They must be able to partake of

vegetarian food and also of animal food, provided that the three aforementioned conditions are complied with and that the meat is not one of the prohibited kinds. They are expected to accept whatever is offered to them, whether vegetarian or meat of the proper kinds. This is not considered contradictory to the *Sila*, because the hearts of such Buddhists, especially of the monks, are pervaded with unbounded kindness and compassion towards animals. Never would they cause animals to be killed. Moreover, against the view that eating meat is wrong, they present the following argument: if meat consumption is morally wrong, then the use of hide, bones, horns of animals should be altogether banned. That, too, should be regarded as wrong. Both factions are still at variance on this subject and some of their members are still carrying on the argument. But there are some who do not argue, preferring to leave the whole matter to the individual's own conscience. *One should not compel others to accept one's own views.* To do that is also mental defilement and therefore to be avoided.

If it is asked what purpose the Lord Buddha hoped to serve by laying down *Silas* which prescribe such uncompromising abstention that they can be fully complied with by only very few people, it has to be admitted that no one can claim to know His exact intention in so doing; nevertheless, one may gather the reason from many principles enunciated in the Dhamma. The Lord Buddha taught us to make a comparison between ourselves and others by saying: "All living

beings are afraid of punishment and death. Life is dear to all beings (as well as to us). By putting ourselves in their place, we realize that we, individually, should neither kill nor cause others to kill." By this principle of the Dhamma, Lord Buddha wanted us to understand, through entering into one another's feelings, that all living beings love life as much as we do and have no less fear of death. That is why, as a matter of simple justice, the Lord Buddha laid down the first *Sila*. The second was formulated to promote mutual respect for each other's rights to their own possessions. The third encourages mutual respect for one another's families. The fourth protects our mutual interests by truthfulness. The fifth helps us to avoid carelessness and negligence. If we set store by carefully guarding our wealth, our families and good faith, then we should not trespass on the rights of others. All the *Silas* or rules of conduct are based solely on the principle of perfect justice. They demonstrate that Buddhism respects the lives, rights, property and so on, of everyone. This is worldly or conventional truth. If the Buddha had made the *Silas* flexible and adaptable to the wishes of the masses, they would not have been consonant with the nature of perfect justice. Lord Buddha would have shown Himself deficient in compassion towards those animals whose slaughter was thus sanctioned. That would not accord with the character of the Buddha, who was filled with compassion towards all sentient beings. Another reason stated at the beginning, is that the *Silas* promote, in particular, "a very special

benefit". This means that the ultimate outcome of adherence to them is freedom from all defilements. The *Silas* are the first steps towards this goal. Total observance of the *Silas*, though there are only five of them, can in itself be a step towards the higher level at which that "very special benefit" is realized. What is perhaps of particular importance with regard to the *Silas* is to discover why people are, or are not, interested in observing them. Some reasons are as follows:-

1. **Owing to the strictness of *Silas***, which involve, for example, abstention from taking the life of any living being. Suppose the rules of moral conduct had been laid down in a more accommodating manner, tolerating some of the infringements we have discussed, would such rules be followed by more people or not? Obviously, no one can say for sure that it would happen, because one gets a general impression that moral rules, in particular those concerning what is regarded as wrong either in the worldly or the legal sense, are all constantly violated, whether the first *Sila* or any other. This demonstrates that the failure to observe them is not due to their strictness. Usually, one's natural inclination is to suit all actions to one's own comfort and convenience. Every nation has its laws and every religion, its *Silas*. Even where some of the rules are quite flexible and accommodating, it is probable that a few people will violate them. Therefore the main reason for violation lies with the individual himself; most people are naturally inclined

to disregard or alter the rules to suit their own convenience and are quite capable of doing so.

2. **Owing to the individuals themselves.**

Then why would the individual infringe the rules, even though this is generally and legally regarded as wrong? The causes of such behaviour embedded within the individuals themselves are undoubtedly greed (*lobha*), aversion (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*), which are born in the heart as defilements (*kilesa*) and, in turn, bring about the absence of shame (*hiri*) or dread of evil (*ottappa*). So if change is needed, it should not take place in the principles of the *Silas*, but be a change of heart, meaning decreasing the *kilesas* rather than increasing them in such a way that *hiri-ottappa* – shame and fear of doing evil, appear in the heart. By so behaving, our ability to comply with the *Silas* will become much greater. Better compliance with the *Silas* does not mean abstention from everything prescribed in them. Abstention from what is worldly or legally regarded as wrong is in itself acceptable conduct.

3. **Owing to necessity**, such as in the following instances:–

Infringement of the first *Sila* in order to protect one's property, life, nation, religion and king, as happens in battle or when one is dealing with criminals or enemies. Transgression of the second *Sila* in order to

keep oneself alive because of hunger or real poverty. There seems to be no reason for violating the third *Sila*, since compliance with it would surely not kill anyone. Infringement of the fourth *Sila* for the sake of one's own welfare. Many of the foregoing instances can be counted as cases of necessity, for example, if one is a fisherman by trade or a medical student.

When one asks oneself, for instance, whether it is really necessary to kill or to steal, one realizes that this is very seldom the case. Consequently even the mere intention not to infringe the *Silas*, except when it is impossible to do otherwise, and to abide by them as far as necessity permits will make us realize that the five *Silas* can be followed, to a great extent, without difficulty or loss of any worldly advantage whatever.

4. **Owing to a lack of supporting and complementary Dhamma.** Lack of Dhamma complementary to each of the rules may also be a cause of their infringement. *Metta* or loving-kindness should be cultivated as (an aspect of) Dhamma complementary to the first *Sila*. *Samma-ajiva* or Right Livelihood should be practised as (an aspect of) Dhamma complementing the second *Sila*. *Santutthita* or contentedness with one's spouse is (an aspect of) Dhamma that should be developed to complement the third *Sila*. Truthfulness is (an aspect of) Dhamma that should be observed to complement the fourth *Sila*. Carefulness and circumspection should be adhered to as (an aspect of)

Dhamma complementing the fifth *Sila*. Explanations of some of the complementary aspects of Dhamma follow. For instance, *Metta* complementing the first *Sila*, where it exists in any being, banishes all desire to harm. To say nothing of the *Metta* or loving-kindness shown by parents to their children, even *Metta* towards pets like dogs and cats is enough to bring about the greatest care for them. Without *Metta*, but with *dosa* or aversion instead, these pets might easily be destroyed. Right Livelihood complementing the second *Sila* can be explained as follows. If one is lazy in work or adopts a wrong mode of livelihood for one's subsistence, one cannot possibly comply with the second *Sila*. Since we all have to eat every day, each of us has to get his food without fail and therefore must have a means of living, and a right one at that.

5. **Owing to absence of leaders who abide by the *Silas*.** As an illustration, there is a saying in a *Jataka* which can be summarized as follows: "When a herd of cattle is travelling, if the leading bull strays, the whole herd goes astray. So it is with the people. If the appointed leader practises *adhamma* or unrighteousness, the multitude will also practise it. The whole nation will suffer if that one fails to abide by the Dhamma. When a herd of cattle is travelling, if the leading bull keeps to the proper course, the whole herd will do the same. So it is with the people. If the appointed leader abides by the Dhamma, the multitude will do likewise. The whole nation

will be contented if the leader upholds the Dhamma.” This Buddhist saying is quite clear. The behaviour of the leader is of great consequence to the masses as they will inevitably follow his example.

The above reasons for being or not being interested in the observance of moral conduct may, each of them, be of significance in relation to the *Sila*. In short, whether the *Silas* are or are not followed by the individuals comprising society depends on whether or not they bring about contentment in accordance with the level of the followers.

In this respect, some have voiced the opinion that the *Silas* may be looked upon as fundamental principles to be applied in a way suited to one’s own status. What is regarded as suitable will be in conformity with the purpose of the *Silas* only if it is adopted without prejudice to others and without favour to oneself, for the purpose of the *Sila* is to avoid harm to others. Besides, they are the first steps towards concentration (*samadhi*) and insight (*panna*). Since observance of the *Silas* should not be literal but should accord with their purposes, it will differ somewhat depending on the status or profession of each individual. For instance, observance of the *Silas* by the common people who desire peace and contentment for all in the family as well as in the nation, will take one form; that of the monks who desire to attain a higher plane of the Dhamma will take another. Both forms will, however, lead to the goal for which observance of the *Silas* was established. Furthermore,

Silas or rules of moral conduct are also the principal factor in national growth, the force that brings about economic prosperity and general contentment. Without *Silas*, the productivity of individuals will tend to eliminate and destroy itself. Where the productivity of one individual is high but is detrimental to that of someone else, nothing is added to the community. Rather, the total yield of the community diminishes and consequently it is difficult to promote general progress and prosperity. Even from this point of view, it can be seen that many people observe the *Silas* in a way suited to their own status, realizing that the *Silas* can bring prosperity to the community.

Generally speaking, people in Buddhist countries know how they should observe the *Silas* or moral rules. They also know that the five *Silas* are in no way an obstruction to prosperity of the individual or the country. The cause for concern does not lie in the fact that too many people strictly observe the *Silas*, but in the fact that too many people infringe them. This goes so far that even those actions which should be eschewed because they are generally or legally considered harmful, are nevertheless still common. What chiefly needs to be set right lies then, in the individual and in the circumstances already dealt with. If everyone were to behave in a way that lessens *kilesas* and generates in the heart enough *hiri-ottappa* and if, at the same time, there are circumstances which make for contentment and comfort, such as freedom to carry on one's livelihood in

an atmosphere of peace and security and ability to earn enough for oneself and one's family, then there would be no cause to infringe the *Silas* and people might even be interested in following the *Silas* and complementary Dhamma, such as cultivating *Metta* (loving-kindness) towards others and diligence in pursuing their livelihood. If the leaders or administrative officers of all ranks were also interested in the *Silas*, if they were prepared to abide by them and not to discharge their duties in harmful ways but in a manner beneficial to the people's welfare, if every sector of the community were to concur in maintaining such good behaviour, the standard of morality would surely improve, because the basis of each individual's mind desires to be good, so people readily see the advantages of the *Silas*. If earning one's living becomes difficult or dangerous, solutions to such contingencies must be given first priority. In the Buddhist religion, the Lord Buddha taught that the present benefits should be taken care of first, for instance, by being diligent and working for a living. Then, after that, He advised people to attend at the same time to their future benefit, for instance, by having faith in and abiding by the *Silas*.

When there is an outcry about a state of degeneration resulting from disrespect for moral values, youths as well as adults clamour for those values to be upheld just as is happening at present. But the reasoning set forth in these paragraphs should be remembered and all of us should join hands in trying to improve the

situation by getting at the real cause. Religious teachers can only point the way. The task cannot be undertaken by any single group of people. All sectors of the community should co-operate in accordance with their duties. All of us should perform our duties with honesty. Each should examine his own behaviour and make an effort to do away with unwholesome conduct by following the principles of the *Silas*. Then abiding by the rules of moral conduct would not be difficult, that is, it can be done by requesting from a monk the *Silas* or by oneself following them, without receiving them from the monks. What is important is one's determination to abide by the *Silas*, that is to abstain from certain actions. Although such abstention may not be complete in the sense of the perfect *Silas* and may apply only to actions regarded as wrong and unwholesome in the worldly or legal sense, that is nevertheless better than not to abstain at all.

The prescription of perfect sila, complete in every respect, does not mean that their observance should also be perfect right from the start. No one would be able to manage that. The practice of the *Silas* should be gradual, step by step, from the lower to the higher stages. That is why the following words are used "I undertake the rule of training to abstain from such and such conduct." This amount to agreeing to train in the *Silas* or moral rules. It also means that observance of the *Silas* is still not yet perfect. It is the same with the study of any branch of knowledge. If one is still learning a subject, it means that

one does not know it yet to perfection. Anyone who knows it completely does not have to train in it. A person who is still learning should not be held responsible for ignorance of what he has yet to learn. ■